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HEBREW WISDOM; OR, THE BOOK OF PROVERBS.

DID the writers of the Old Testament have any system of philosophy? In the technical sense, No. We have no careful arranging of facts into great systems, no "inquiry controlled by the rigid laws of logic and carried on in a scientific method." If we expect anything like this, we shall be disappointed, and we shall have to admit that the ancient Jews lacked a formal system of philosophy. But if, on the other hand, we stretch the word "philosophy" to take in the three greatest thoughts that can come into human consciousness—namely, the universe, man, and God—then we can truly say the Jews did have a philosophy. For, as Kant has somewhere said: "The whole object of philosophy is to define, so far as the human brain can, the mutual relations of God, man, and the universe." Taking this broad view of philosophy, we are, I think, justified in calling the authors of certain books in the Old Testament philosophers.

Admitting, then, that there were Hebrew philosophers, in what books of the Bible are their works to be found? We answer that we can find their wisdom—because, popularly speaking, wisdom and philosophy in Jewish thought are synonymous—in the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and, in a sense, Job. If our Bibles did but contain, as undoubtedly they ought, the books of Ecclesiasticus and Wisdom, then we have in these five ancient classics productions which, in the broad sense of Kant's definition, may be regarded as philosophical.

Even the most careless reader of the Old Testament perceives at once that the books just cited are different from other portions of Holy Writ. We find in them no prophets delivering their thrilling messages or poets throwing their whole souls into a psalm or hymn. We come across no dashing and reckless freebooters or wicked and apostate kings. We are in an atmosphere far removed from the art-

less, naïve, folklore charm of the narratives of Genesis. We are brought into touch with no Levite or priest lovingly and carefully elaborating some detail of ritual worship. Scholars, moreover, assure us that in these philosophical works of the Jews there is not a paragraph that can be twisted to show that the writers cherished any Messianic hopes. "The name of Israel is found in only one of the books of wisdom, and only two give any recognition of the chosen people." There is only one reference to the service of the temple, and, what is more important, there is next to no reference to a personal God. It is not for a moment maintained that the writers did not have such a conception, but only that, as we study their works, we find that they have very little to say regarding it. When we contrast the strong, buoyant, triumphant faith of Abraham, Moses, David, and Isaiah with the faith of the authors of Proverbs, we feel at once in a different atmosphere. The wise men look at life in another way from prophets and poets. Nevertheless, as I shall try to show, these books of wisdom constitute an important part of our literary heritage, and could not be spared from the sacred canon without grievous loss and injury. It is just as well to remember that there is such a thing as spiritual economy in our religious natures, and that we cannot always stand with Moses on Mount Pisgah. Therefore these wisdom books of the Old Testament, which at times remind one of the writings of Benjamin Franklin, often appeal to us when we should be deaf to the voice of the prophet and indifferent to the faith of the poet.

The first book of wisdom literature that meets us in the Old Testament is the book of Proverbs, and, owing to the space at our disposal, shall be the only one examined. We find that it is made up of a loosely connected series of wise, witty, and pointed sayings, embodied in proverbs and sententious maxims. These proverbs cover a vast range of subjects. They touch on theological, ethical, sociological, and economical questions. Their authors show us, above everything else, that they are marvelously keen observers of

men and things. Their analysis of human conduct, like a sword of steel, cuts through all the vices, follies, and shams of their day. Perhaps we cannot do better than to let one of the authors tell of his reason for writing: "To know wisdom and instruction; to discern the words of understanding; to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness and judgment and equity; to give subtilty to the simple, to the young man knowledge and discretion: that the wise man may hear, and increase in learning; and that the man of understanding may attain unto sound counsels: to understand a proverb, and a figure; the words of the wise, and their dark sayings."

The authors of the books of wisdom, though they are preëminently worldly wise, and though they are wonderfully close observers of life—in fact, so close that some scholars call them the "Humanists of the Bible"—have nevertheless, we believe, made a contribution to religious faith that is considerable, and is not to be lightly gainsaid. As Prof. Moulton remarks, after noting the difference which separates the proverbs of practical life from prophetic denunciation of sin: "This is a distinctness in which there is no clashing: the wise have reached the same conclusion as the prophets and psalmists, only they have reached it by a different route." The truth of this can be seen by a cursory reference to the book of Proverbs. The Hebrew sages thus express their entire faith in Jehovah, the Lord God of Sabaoth: "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart, and lean not upon thine own understanding: in all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths." "Be not afraid of sudden fear, neither of the desolation of the wicked, when it cometh: for the Lord shall be thy confidence, and shall keep thy foot from being taken." There is also the conviction that "the eyes of the Lord are in every place, keeping watch upon the evil and the good."

The ethical value, moreover, of this particular book of wisdom is great and enduring. Its authors lay much stress upon right conduct, and when we remember that conduct, as Matthew Arnold has pointed out, is at least three-fourths

of life, this fact alone ought to make us thankful that these books are in the Bible.

The great object which the Hebrew philosopher has ever in view is to induce his readers to walk in the way of good men and to keep the path of the righteous: "For the upright shall dwell in the land, and the perfect shall remain in it. But the wicked shall be cut off from the land, and they that deal treacherously shall be rooted out of it." Because, most assuredly, "In the way of righteousness there is life, and in the pathway thereof there is no death, for the path of the righteous is as the light of dawn, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day."

When we proceed to examine the book of Proverbs from the literary point of view, its value is seen to be enormous. Taking literature, as Arnold took poetry, as "a criticism of life," we have in this ancient classic a very mine of intellectual enjoyment. Passing over all peculiarities of style, such as the use of metaphor, simile, alliteration, personification, parallelism, antithesis, we see the ancient dweller of Palestine as he really was, in the town and in the country, in the street and in the temple, in the transactions of business and in the duties of religion. In a word, these proverbs, maxims, and poems reproduce for us, by a series of cameo pictures, the life in Palestine as it was in the days of the kings and queens of Judah and Israel.

That we may appreciate to the full this wisdom book of the Jews, let us imagine ourselves back in Jerusalem or Samaria, living the life of the day, and observing our fellow-men and women from a club window (that is, supposing they had clubs in those days), and noting their follies and frailties.

As good citizens, interested in the safety and honor of our country, we can appreciate these wise words: "Righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin is a reproach to any people. . . . When it goeth well with the righteous, the city rejoiceth: and when the wicked perish, there is shouting. . . . By the blessing of the upright the city is exalted; but it is overthrown by the mouth of the wicked."

The oppression of the poor is strongly condemned by

these wise men of the Bible. True, their condemnation is not couched in the impassioned eloquence or burning rhetoric of an Isaiah or a Jeremiah, yet nevertheless it cuts deep and goes directly to the point. "He that oppresseth the poor reproacheth his Maker: but he that hath mercy on the needy honoreth him." "Rob not the poor, because he is poor, neither oppress the afflicted in the gate: for the Lord will plead their cause, and despoil of life those that despoil them." "Whoso stoppeth his ears at the cry of the poor, he also shall cry, but he shall not be heard." "Remove not the ancient landmark; and enter not into the fields of the fatherless: for their redeemer is strong; he shall plead their cause against thee."

The sad condition of the poor man has never been more graphically sketched than in these sentences: "The poor is hated even of his own neighbor; but the rich hath many friends." "All the brethren of the poor do hate him: how much more do his friends go far from him! He pursueth them with words, but they are gone." "The poor useth entreaties, but the rich answereth roughly." "The rich ruleth over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender."

That there were financiers in that far-off age who did not hesitate to corner the wheat market cannot be doubted. "He that withholdeth corn, the people shall curse him: but blessing shall be upon the head of him that selleth it."

The wise observer of men noticed then, as we can notice now (all pessimists to the contrary), "That the memory of the just is blessed, but the name of the wicked shall rot."

Feminine frailty is very caustically portrayed: "As a jewel of gold in a swine's snout, so is a fair woman which is without discretion." As a contrast we have: "A virtuous woman is a crown to her husband: but she that maketh ashamed is as rottenness in his bones."

Moreover, one of the gems of the whole book of Proverbs is a poem on a virtuous woman. Line by line the author paints his picture, so that at the last the portrait comes to life, and we stand in the presence of a mother of Israel! "A virtuous woman, who can find? For her price is above

rubies. The heart of her husband trusteth in her, and he shall have no lack of gain. She doeth him good and not evil all the days of her life. She seeketh wool and flax, and worketh willingly with her hands. . . . She riseth also while it is yet night and giveth meat to her household, and their task to her maidens. . . . She layeth her hands to the distaff, and her hands hold the spindle. . . . Strength and dignity are her clothing; and she laugheth at the time to come. She openeth her mouth with wisdom; and the law of kindness is on her tongue. She looketh well to the ways of her household, and eateth not the bread of idleness. Her children rise up, and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praiseth her: Many daughters have done virtuously, but thou excellest them all."

The Hebrew wise men extol over and over again the blessings of contentment: "A merry heart maketh a cheerful countenance." "Better is little with the fear of the Lord." "Better is a dinner of herbs where love is, than a stalled ox and hatred therewith." "Better is a little with righteousness than great revenues with injustice." "Better is a dry morsel and quietness therewith, than a house full of feasting with strife."

On the other hand, they were naturally very severe against boastful arrogance: "Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall." "Put not thyself forward in the presence of the king, and stand not in the place of great men: for better is it that it be said unto thee, Come up hither; than that thou shouldst be put lower in the presence of the prince, whom thine eyes have seen." And then follows this sarcastic, and yet at the same time truthful advice: "Go not forth hastily to strive, lest thou know not what to do in the end thereof, when thy neighbor hath put thee to shame."

Here are two proverbs which make one think of the sayings of Poor Richard: "The north wind bringeth forth rain: so doth a backbiting tongue an angry countenance." "Whoso diggeth a pit shall fall therein: and he that rolleth a stone, it shall return upon him."

Equally pithy are these proverbs against yielding to hasty temper: "Lay thine hand upon thy mouth. For the churning of milk bringeth forth butter, and the wringing of the nose bringeth forth blood: so the forcing of wrath bringeth forth strife."

The inestimable advantages of kindness and tact in our dealings with men and women have surely never been more beautifully depicted than in the following: "A soft answer turneth away wrath." "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in baskets of silver." "Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul, and health to the bones."

Here are two short poems which littérateurs would rave over if they found them in Theocritus or Vergil: "I went by the field of the slothful, and by the vineyard of the man void of understanding; and, lo, it was all grown over with thorns, the face thereof was covered with nettles, and the stone wall thereof was broken down. Then I beheld, and considered well: I saw, and received instruction. 'Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep:' so shall thy poverty come as a robber; and thy want as an armed man."

The above is a picture of neglect and decay; here is its opposite: "Be thou diligent to know the state of thy flocks, and look well to thy herds: for riches are not forever; and doth the crown endure unto all generations? The hay is carried, and the tender grass showeth itself, and the herbs of the mountains are gathered in. The lambs are for thy clothing, and the goats are the price of the field; and there will be goats' milk enough for thy food, and for the food of thy household; and maintenance for thy maidens."

Space will not permit us to comment on an injunction that makes us think of St. Francis of Assisi, "A righteous man regardeth the life of his beast," or the stern and solemn warning against those who break the fifth commandment, "Whoso curseth his father or his mother, his lamp shall be put out in the blackest darkness." These and many other subjects are handled with a rare incisiveness of touch that will forever appeal to those who appreciate

wise, witty, and pointed sayings, when they are presented to us by veritable "masters of sentences." We must note, however, that the book of Proverbs is remarkably rich in humor, though few people realize this, owing to their conviction that to read the Bible for literary enjoyment is somehow or other to belittle its unique power and authority. Fortunately a change for the better is slowly but surely penetrating the minds of Christian people everywhere, so that now, along with the devotional, there also goes the literary study of the Bible. That this will be a tremendous gain no one who has ever approached his Bible from this point of view will for a moment deny or question.

When we try to sum up the value of the writings of the Hebrew wise men in the book of Proverbs, we find that it is difficult to exaggerate it. The sages touch life at many points. They are concerned not with the future, but with the present. The judgment day of the Lord is not, as with the prophets, in the future, but in the present, and is daily sifting, sorting, testing the children of men. Life is a continual day of judgment. The fool is forever falling into folly. The scorner is constantly being beaten with stripes. Pride is perpetually falling into a ditch, and sloth is always feeling the teeth of want. In fact, there is hardly a social type that is not represented in the human comedy of the book of Proverbs. Change their dress and language, and to-day we meet with the same men and women as cheered or disgusted, bored or inspired the wise men of Jerusalem and Samaria. Human nature is about the same after all, and the sluggard, the drunkard, the fool, the thief, the practical joker, the whisperer, the talebearer are with us to-day. We ought surely, then, to be thankful that there is in the Old Testament one book which treats of these things. Life with the most of us is made up of a succession of commonplaces, and there is no work of literature, ancient or modern, that with more unerring judgment strips the mask from folly, or glorifies the simple, ordinary duties of everyday life than does the book of Proverbs.

But it may be objected that this Hebrew wisdom is en-

tirely utilitarian; that it says, "Be honest, because it is the best policy." It cannot be denied that the maxims of the book of Proverbs can be read in a utilitarian sense; but it would be unjust to the Jewish sages to say that they were only worldly wise, and nothing more. Back of their utilitarianism was their faith in God. They could not escape the genius of their race. There was always present the thought of God who would apportion what was just to the righteous and to the wicked. And, while an agnostic can go to the book of Proverbs and find there a very arsenal of canny, shrewd, worldly-wise maxims, yet if he is unprejudiced he will also find on the part of the writers an unutterable conviction that there is a God in heaven who slumbers not nor sleeps.

One other feature of the book, and we are done. The Hebrew wise men and sages, in their poring over the beauty, majesty, and power of Wisdom, came at last to personify her as a glorious female figure, a very Jewish Minerva! In a picture, strikingly bold and graphic, we have the contrast between the "Strange Woman" and Wisdom. Both appear on the streets and cry, but the pathway of one leadeth to Sheol, and the pathway of the other to life and joy.

Wisdom crieth aloud in the street,
 She uttereth her voice in the broad places;
 She crieth in the chief places of concourse;
 At the entering in of the gates,
 In the city, she uttereth her words:
 How long, ye simple ones, will ye love simplicity?
 And scorners delight them in scorning,
 And fools hate knowledge?
 Turn you at my reproof:
 Behold, I will pour out my spirit unto you,
 I will make known my words unto you.

"Happy is the man that findeth wisdom. . . . She is more precious than rubies: and none of the things that thou canst desire are to be compared to her. Length of days is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace!"

GEORGE DOWNING SPARKS.